

## **A Study on the Conflict Resolution Styles of Generation Y Students in Indian Context**

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### **Abstract**

Generation Y, is probably the fastest growing workforce and the most recent cohorts to enter the workforce in the world today. Unlike the erstwhile generation of theirs, they are an affluent generation and raised in a time of economic prosperity and expansion. This generation is typified by certain characteristics as they are highly techsavvy, family centric, achievement oriented and prefer to have meaningful careers. It is quite likely that conflict happens when the two generations co exist under the same roof. The paper attempts to find out the conflict styles adopted by the Gen Y students. Conflict styles has been measured using the conflict resolution Inventory (CRI) instrument prepared by S Purohit, which measures the five dimensions namely confrontation, compromise, negotiation, withdrawal and resignation. An attempt has been made to find out whether Gen Y with their typical characteristics has a specific conflict style. Preference of conflict styles across the gender and background and work experience has been looked into. The CRI instrument was administered with around 136 respondents pursuing under graduate and post graduate course in the city of Cochin to find out the conflict styles of these students. The study revealed that a dominant conflict style was not associated with this generation.

The findings, implications, directions for further research and the limitations are discussed in the paper

**Key words:** Conflict Styles, Approach Mode, Avoidance Mode, Generation X, Generation Y.

### **Introduction**

Recently a senior HR professional in an article quoted of his experience of an “employee impasse” at his office as the impasse had to do with a young group of campus hires who had decided to protest against their manager’s lack of respect for “their space.” A chief trainer in her late 50’s was angry because her phone calls were never answered back, instead found the response back as text or emails in her inbox. This is where the outlook of generation varies- we term them as Gen X & Gen Y and perhaps more to come. Fortune Magazine has termed Gen Y as the high maintenance but potentially most high performing generation in history as they are entering the workplace with more information greater technological skills and high expectation for themselves

and others. Gen y is increasingly important now because of the fact that they are becoming part of workforce and customer dynamics have changed drastically which beckon for creative ways of handling these multi generations.

### Generation defined

The term generation has been defined in numerous ways. One of the most accepted definitions refers a generation as “a group of people or cohorts who share birth years and experiences as they move through time together” (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66). This definition, as well as other definitions defines generation as a group of people with similar views, values, and attitudes, as a result of common life experiences (Edmunds & Turner, 2005; Ryder, 1965). The effects of these life experiences are seen as fairly stable over their lives (Smola & Sutton, 2002) and can be used to distinguish one generation from another (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998).

### The four generations

A review of the literature (Hammill, 2005; Dwyer,2008; Wynn,2011; Saxena & Jain,2012) on the categorization of these generational cohorts shows that each cohort has been exposed to certain specific economic factors, technological factors and socio-cultural factors that have shaped up their values, beliefs and attitudes. It was found that they can be categorized as shown in the Table 1. Very limited empirical research has been done as such in these generational differences and hence the generalizations are subject to criticism too. Therefore the categorization of these cohorts with their specific characteristics can be viewed in a superficial sense.

<b>Type of generation</b>	<b>Also known as</b>	<b>Corresponding Years</b>	<b>Events that shaped up their values ,beliefs and attitudes</b>
<b>Veterans</b>	Seniors/traditionalists	1945 and earlier	The great depression, two world wars, threat of nuclear exchange
<b>Baby boomers</b>	Boomer	1946-1966	Largest generation in numbers ,prolonged cold wars ,experienced prosperity and affluence
<b>Generation X</b>	Baby bust	1967-1980	Outsourcing ,rampant downsizing, modernization ,energy crisis, new feminism ,personal computers
<b>Generation Y</b>	The nexters /millennial /echo boomers	1980 -2000	Increased violence ,terrorist attacks, celebrity scandals ,reality shows, increase in nuclear family

*Table 1: Categorization of Generational cohorts*

The changing demographics bring in the possibility of at least four generations of people working together under the same roof. Gen y 's in the workforce are going to increase markedly in the workspace. It is predicted that by 2020 the matures/ veterans in the workplaces will gradually decrease to 1% and Boomers 15 percent. The Gen Xers will show the least change over the next decade, remaining at approximately 25-30 percent of the workplace in 2020. Gen y will constitute around 45 – 50 % of the workforce. A new generation of employees (Generation Z, born in the late 1990s) is projected to begin entering the workplace by around 2020. This changing demographic trends indicate that there would be four generations with distinct views, values & attitudes and coexisting under the same roof . Creating a work environment that will reduce conflict and misunderstanding and enhancing their productivity from both the newer (gen y) cohorts and the older (gen x) cohorts would be greatest challenge for the HR managers and the supervisors

### **Gen y characteristics**

This enormously powerful group in terms of sheer size brought up during the times of economic prosperity believes in empowerment, are networked ,collaborative ,highly social and team focused, (UN report 2010) need they demand workplace relationships that cater to the their needs of social networking, work life balance and civic engagement. loyalty does not have the same meaning as their earlier cohorts had as these millennial's seek for instant gratification (Wynn 2012). These generational cohorts also known as the nexters can never be lured by distant pay raises and promotions. They wouldn't mind leaving their employer if they find a better opportunity elsewhere for themselves. They expect to be included in intellectual talk and included in management decision. They do not believe in hierarchies and rather expect a mentoring role from the seniors than a supervisory role. To this generation, work is seen as an elective activity to further one's personal goals rather than a necessity (Saxena & Jain 2012). Some researchers connote them in negative manner as the "generation me" as they are sometimes described with negative connotations such as being self-centered and unmotivated .However, this cohort has emerged as the most educated, technology savvy generation ever. They have also been quoted as ones who have strong work ethics when they have landed in the right job. Unlike their predecessor gen y has seen the recession and how their parents lost their jobs and savings they value work life balance and working for long hours never appeal to this generation.

### **Multi generations and role of conflict**

The shift in the demographics in terms of multi generations at workplaces brings in a lot of diversity too. This brings in a lot of complexities as each generation have their own expectations of the workplace and hence perspectives differ which brings in scope for conflicts at workplace. While several generations are at the workplace they should be encouraged to deal with generational differences and adopt the right conflict styles too. Failure to do so may cause misunderstandings, mis communications and mixed signals (Smola & Sutton, 2002). Conflicts are likely to arise between the baby boomers /Gen x and the Gen y as they would comprise a major portion of the workforce. For instance the Gen Y's are willing to work for longer hours but are more concerned

about the conflict between work and family as compared to baby boomers. They are more likely to embrace change within an organizational structure and be given opportunities for promotion and validation. They do not like to be micro managed, and for them work should be interesting and fun.

### **Conflict styles**

Conflict has been defined as the process in which one party perceives that its interests are being thwarted/ opposed or negatively affected by another party. The conflict process can be triggered by differences in goals, values, tasks or due to inadequate resources, transparency, communication etc. It is assumed that individuals generally adopt conflict styles that are compatible to their individual goals and values in an organizational setting. As human beings interact in organizations, differing values and situations create conflicts between people. Modern theorists opine that when conflict is recognized, and managed in a proper manner, personal and organizational benefits are seen (Silverthorne, 2005). Conflict when left unmanaged can lead to diminished cohesiveness amongst employees, productivity and reduced organizational fitness. The effect of conflict whether positive or negative depends on the person who manages it and the adoption of the right conflict resolution style. In this context, we find ample scope for conflicts between generations as each generational cohort have their own values, beliefs and attitudes.

Conflict styles can be defined as the style that an individual chooses to satisfy oneself or others (Womack, 1988). Some of the styles of the persons involved in a conflict can play a critical role (either be individuals, or as groups). Certain styles promote a search for solutions while some lead to a deadlock and result in strained relations. Several styles have been identified by theorist – one of the early theories of conflict style resolution was one-dimensional proposed by Mary P Follet (1924) where three styles were proposed – domination compromise and integration and added two more secondary styles namely avoidance and suppression. Later, Blake and Mouton (1964) developed the managerial grid, which included two dimensions: concern for production and concern for people with four styles–forcing (low-low for both, smoothing, compromising and problem solving (high- high for both). Thomas and Kilmann (1974, 1977) based on the work of Blake and Mouton labelled two components of conflict behavior as assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness was a behavior that satisfies one’s own concern, and cooperativeness was a behavior that satisfies another person’s concerns. These two dimensions yield the five conflict management styles of competitiveness, accommodation, compromise, avoiding, and collaboration. This model has been one of the popular models. Pruitt (1983) suggested dual concern model with four styles –yielding, problem solving, contending and inaction. Rahim & Bonomo (1979,1983) came with a differentiation with two dimensions namely – concern for self and concern for others which basically portrays the motivational orientation of an individual at the time of conflict. Rahim’s model is based on five conflict handling approaches namely integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising. All the styles however converge into the perceptions of the conflicting parties when conflicts arise between two parties it may either lead to resignation to fate or a power struggle Pareekh & purohit (2010) proposed that

the perception of the conflicting groups should be used to understand the modes of conflict management. They suggested two modes of conflict management – approach and avoidance. Avoidance is based on fear and dysfunctional while approach is based on hope and functional. Avoidance is typified by a tendency to deny, rationalise or avoid the problem, to displace anger or aggression or to use emotional appeals while approach orientation is characterised by making efforts to find a solution by one's own efforts or with the help of others. This dimension has been used in understanding conflict styles of managers (Pareek 1987). The instrument used for this study takes in this concept and has identified five styles

- **Resignation (Avoidance mode)** – The extreme mode may turn to be fatal as it results in a state of helplessness due to hostility of the other group or ignoring the conflict by denying an unpleasant situation and letting the conflict resolve in its due course
- **Withdrawal (Avoidance mode)** – This mode of conflict tries to get away from the conflict situation by avoiding/withdrawing from the conflict when it takes place /physical separation/defining boundaries between the conflicting parties
- **Confrontation (Approach mode)** - In this mode the parties fight out the issue to get a solution which may result in the win-lose trap as both parties have opposing interests and are unreasonable
- **Compromise (Approach mode)** – This mode is the process of sharing the gains but with little efforts to resolve the conflict
- **Negotiation (Approach mode)** – The most satisfactory mode when both the groups jointly confront the problem and explore the situation

Establishing research findings on multigenerational conflict styles is relatively at an early stage. Since workplace diversity in terms of multigenerations would be an inevitable phenomenon in the future, empirical studies are needed to establish the differences and to study how these generations interact while at work and how organisations can be responsive enough to understand these styles to make workplaces ready for these generations. This paper therefore is an attempt to identify the styles that Gen Y adopts while in conflict with others.

### **Research methodology**

Conflict styles have been measured using the conflict resolution Inventory (CRI) instrument prepared by S Purohit, which measures the five dimensions namely confrontation, compromise, negotiation, withdrawal and resignation. The instrument contains 20 items that measure the five dimensions of conflict styles and the split half reliability for the instrument was found to be 0.516. These five styles are using the approach avoidance mode of conflict management. The study sample consisted of 136 respondents of whom 61 % were males and 39 % females. A cross section of the sample was done in terms of the background of the students. Out of 137 respondents 35 % hail from an urban background 23.5% from a rural background and 41.5 % from a semi-urban background.

Based on the review of literature the key objectives of this study were

1. To find the preferred conflict style of gen y students.
2. To find out the most dominant style followed
3. To assess whether male and females have the same style
4. To identify conflict style of students with work experience
5. To see whether the background of the students decide the conflict style of the students

### Analysis of data

To verify the objectives of the study simple statistical tools like the mean and standard deviation was used. Data was collected from around 136 respondents from the city of Cochin also known as Ernakulam in the state of Kerala.

**TABLE 2: Mean score and standard deviation of Conflict Styles of Gen y students**

<b>Conflict Styles</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Compromise	12.40	3.04
Resignation	12.25	3.09
Withdrawal	12.36	2.86
Negotiation	13.20	3.26
Confrontation	11.61	2.93

The five conflict styles and their preference by the students were noted using the CRI instrument. The mean scores and the standard deviation of the respondents preference towards each style is presented in Table 2. The study consisted of 136 college students undergoing undergraduate, post graduate and technical course from Ernakulam. The most preferred conflict style from the study was found to be negotiation followed by the compromise. Both are the approach modes of conflict, while the least preference was given to the confrontation mode.

**TABLE 3: Mean score and standard deviation of Conflict Styles across the gender**

<b>Conflict Styles</b>	<b>Male</b>		<b>Female</b>	
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Compromise</b>	12.88	3.03	11.63	2.93
<b>Resignation</b>	12.38	2.84	12.02	3.47
<b>Withdrawal</b>	12.12	2.78	12.73	2.97
<b>Negotiation</b>	13.49	3.36	12.73	3.09
<b>Confrontation</b>	12.01	2.55	10.83	3.36

Conflict styles of males and females were analyzed and the mean scores and standard deviation of the two groups are presented in Table 3. This shows that males and females had a marked difference in the conflict styles preferred. The highest mean score for males was for the negotiation style (approach) and compromise (approach) respectively, while for the females highest mean scores were for withdrawal and negotiation style. It can be inferred that males preferred an approach style while females preferred both approach mode and avoidance approach ie the withdrawal. Withdrawal mode means getting away from the conflict situation which could be in different forms, either by avoiding conflict situations, physically separating one self, or withdrawing from the situation of conflict. This difference across the gender could be because of the nurturing in the society as females are groomed to be caring and sensitive while men are groomed to be more aggressive and daring in their interpersonal relation.

**TABLE: 4 Mean score and standard deviation Experience and Conflict Styles of students**

Conflict Styles	Experienced		Inexperienced	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Compromise</b>	12.23	3.55	12.47	2.79
<b>Resignation</b>	12.0	3.05	12.36	3.12
<b>Withdrawal</b>	12.41	2.0	12.33	3.19
<b>Negotiation</b>	13.74	2.96	12.94	3.39
<b>Confrontation</b>	11.82	2.63	11.43	3.07

To identify the conflict style of respondents with experience, they were categorized into experienced and inexperienced and mean scores were taken. Table 4 shows the mean and standard deviation scores of the preferred conflict style of experienced and the inexperienced category. Of the study sample 68% had no work experience and 32 % had prior work experience of which 94% had only up to two years of experience. It was found that students with prior work experience had a greater tendency to use the approach mode of conflict ie the negotiation style. This style tries to explore a solution by both the conflicting parties trying to confront the problem jointly. Withdrawal is also used by this group, which indicates that they do have a tendency to withdraw from the conflict situation too. When conflict is involved individuals will be concerned about the actual conflict but also with the aftermath of the conflict as to what actions the superiors might take and to what extent they will be protected at the workplace. Preference to the withdrawal style could be because of these reasons. In the case of students who do not have prior work experience, the most favored conflict style is the approach modes of conflict ie negotiation & compromise. A seemingly evident difference was not observed in the conflict style preference based on the factor called experience, as the mean scores were closer.

**TABLE : 5 Mean score and standard deviation of the background of the students and Conflict Styles**

Conflict Styles	Rural		Semi Urban		Urban	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Compromise</b>	13.68	2.53	11.95	2.62	12.05	3.61
<b>Resignation</b>	12.04	2.92	12.52	3.09	12.05	3.25
<b>Withdrawal</b>	11.8	2.89	12.55	3.44	12.51	1.95
<b>Negotiation</b>	13.12	3.38	13	3.38	13.49	3.11
<b>Confrontation</b>	12.56	2.83	11.05	2.83	11.49	3.02

An analysis as to the conflict style preferences on the students based on the background from which they hail was done to assess whether there existed any difference. The students were categorized as urban, semi urban and rural. Table 5 presents the mean & SD scores of each of these categories based on their background. In Indian context individual from the rural background has a collectivist orientation- which means they are more concerned about others feelings and accommodate accordingly and try to maintain interpersonal relations and hence have a greater inclination towards the approach modes. In our analysis too, students from the rural background prefer compromise and then negotiation style. In these two styles bargaining takes place as the parties share gains as the intent is to continue relationships but need not result in a win-win situation always. India has a collectivist culture, but individuals hailing from a urban /semi urban are technologically advanced and connected to the world and would have a western influence in their orientation though not highly individualistic as seen in the US counterparts. This group has given preference to the negotiation mode and then the withdrawal style of conflict handling.

### **Conclusion and limitations of the study**

From the study we can conclude that the male students prefer the approach modes of conflict and the females have a mixed preference of both approach and avoidance. It was observed that an extreme mode of approach/avoidance ie the confrontation/resignation was not much preferred by this group. This could be partly attributed to the collectivist culture that Indians have. The conflict styles and the experience factor were studied and the study revealed that students who had prior work experience had a tendency to use the negotiation and withdrawal mode, while the inexperienced students favored the approach modes of conflict handling. This shift could be because the experienced category surveyed in this study were relatively novices in the field and more concerned about making the superiors satisfied so that they need not face the aftermath of the conflict and therefore preferred the withdrawal style too. The background of the individuals seems to be a factor in deciding the conflict style adopted as it is seen in the study that individual from rural backgrounds have higher mean score for the approach mode of conflict handling. Students from the semi urban and urban backgrounds had a mixed approach where they are more

inclined to negotiation and withdrawal style. An understanding of the conflict styles that the gen y is likely to adopt while in conflict situations would be of immense use for the superiors and human resource professionals as this knowledge on how gen y are likely resolve conflicts would be of great advantage. Though differences exist, how each generation try to resolve the conflict is important. It is seen in the study that the gen y students in the Indian context do not prefer a confrontation mode in resolving conflicts, rather prefer to negotiate or withdraw while in conflict.

The area researched is extremely relevant in the coming years anywhere across the globe and this study was done in one country and in a small city ,therefore more empirical research needs to be done on a wider population. The conflict styles of only a homogenous group of young college students' were assessed; therefore it cannot be generalized to a non student sample. A comparative study of conflict styles both gen x and geny could be done to see whether there is any marked difference as portrayed in the literature review while at workplace. Limited research work has been done in this direction. Researchers can extend the study by including other variables like cultural orientation, gender role, organizational status, importance of conflict situations etc with a wider group for a generalization of conflict styles.

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